



# RELIGION

and the  
reconstruction  
of civil society

EDITORS: J W DE GRUCHY S MARTIN

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*Papers from the founding congress of the*  
**SOUTH AFRICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION**  
*January 1974*

*edited by*  
**J W de Gruchy**  
**S Martin**

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA  
PRETORIA

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# Introduction

*John W de Gruchy*

The essays published in this volume were amongst the more than sixty papers presented at the founding congress of the South African Academy of Religion (SAAR) held in Pretoria from 17-19 January 1994. The theme of the congress was Religion and Civil Society, a subject of considerable concern in the modern world, and of particular interest to those of us who were witnessing the birth of a new South Africa. Three months later Mr Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President of South Africa not far from the University of South Africa where the congress had been held. Nothing demonstrated more the multi-cultural and multi-faith character of South Africa, the important role assigned to religion within our civil society, and the expectation that the various religious traditions had an important role to fulfil in the reconstruction of the country.

Many observers have noted that South Africa is a 'very religious country'. That may, or may not be a compliment, but it is a reasonably accurate description. The fact that there are Departments of Religious Studies, as well as Faculties or Departments of Christian Theology, in virtually all our universities, and that religion is part of the curriculum within our school systems, is indicative of its pervasive character and influence. It is possible that this might change during the next few decades as South Africa rejoins the world, and as the acids of modernity bite more deeply into our society. But there is nothing inevitable about secularisation. On the contrary, the indications are that South Africa will continue to be profoundly influenced by the various religious traditions which are present within it, though undoubtedly in new and different ways to those with which we have become familiar in the past.

Religion is an ambiguous phenomenon. Depending on one's perspective, some of it is bad and some of it good. We know that only too well from our own South African experience where certain forms of Christianity gave legitimacy to apartheid, and others were in the forefront of the struggle to end its rule. Part of the task of the study of religion is not only to explore its character and seek to understand the ways in which it manifests itself, but also to exercise critical judgement on its truth claims as well as on the ways in which it impinges upon society. This is of fundamental importance in the struggle to ensure that a society such as ours is able to nurture moral values essential to our future. The scientific study of religion is of fundamental importance in this regard. A central aim of the South African Academy of Religion is to enable this task to be undertaken in a much more coherent and integrated way by providing a forum in and through which scholars from different disciplines, different faith communities (or none), different academic contexts, and different cultures, can co-operate in a new way.

It would be wrong to suggest that none of this has taken place prior to the formation of SAAR. The Association for the Study of Religion has long existed for this very purpose, and there are almost a dozen other academic societies in South Africa which have been engaged in the study of the Christian religion in relation to the traditional disciplines of theological study. But biblical scholars, theologians, and church historians have seldom had an opportunity to come together in the way in which the Academy now makes possible, and to do so in company with scholars from other faith communities as well as in dialogue with social scientists outside of the religious studies orbit who are also engaged in the study of religion within their disciplines. In brief, what the establishment of SAAR recognises is the need for both an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion, and one which takes into full account the religious pluralism which increasingly characterises our society.

There can be no gainsaying that however much African religion is pervasive in our society, the dominant religious tradition since the advent of colonialism has been Christianity. Today the vast majority of the population claim some link with one or other of the Christian churches. The problem is that whenever one religious tradition becomes dominant it tends to domineer, often riding rough-shod over other religious traditions, and seeking to control the shaping of society. This is a problem for all who believe that while Christianity - like any other religion - should participate fully in the shaping of civil society, it is contrary to its essential character to do-so in a way which is sometimes dehumanising. One can be a convinced member of a religious faith community and tradition, to argue for its truth-claims, and to participate in the shaping of society in terms of its values, without triumphalism and in co-operation and dialogue with people of



other faiths. As in so many other aspects of our South African common life, the need for tolerance and mutual understanding is a priority.

The origins of the South African Academy of Religion can be traced back to two different sources. The idea originated in the Theological Society of South Africa when a proposal for the establishment of an Academy of Religion was accepted at the Society's annual congress in Port Elizabeth in 1990. This was then communicated to other cognate societies for their deliberation and response. Quite independently, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was engaged in sponsoring annual theological conferences of an interdisciplinary nature on a biennial basis. After consultation between the various societies and the HSRC, it was agreed to convene an exploratory meeting towards the end of 1992. Professors Willem Vorster of the University of South Africa and Johann Mouton of the HSRC, who had been involved in the planning of the theological conferences, very kindly agreed to convene this meeting, and through their efforts, the HSRC agreed to provide the necessary secretarial assistance and financial help. Eleven societies were represented at this exploratory meeting which agreed to proceed with the establishment of the Academy. An interim executive committee was elected to prepare the way, of which it my privilege to be elected chair and thus to preside at the founding Congress. In that capacity I wish to acknowledge the help of the HSRC, without whose support the launching of SAAR would not have been possible. I also wish to thank all those who shared in the planning of the congress, those who contributed essays to this volume, and especially my co-editor Steve Martin whose diligent editorial labours have proved indispensable.

The untimely death at the beginning of 1993 of one of the key members of the interim executive committee, Professor Willem Vorster, was a considerable blow to the fledgling Academy and to scholarship more widely in South Africa. We are glad, however, that we can remember his role in the formation of SAAR in dedicating this volume to his memory. SAAR was formally constituted on Wednesday 18 January 1994 when its constitution was adopted. Professor Simon Maimela elected its first President, and a Board was appointed to serve until the next congress in 1996.

As already intimated, not all of the papers presented at the congress in 1994 have been included here. Apart from anything else, that would have required a book of more than twice the size of this one. The essays included have been carefully selected, edited and revised for publication, and they have been grouped under three major headings: I. Introductory issues; II. Religion and religious traditions; and III. Religion and social change in South Africa. In making the selection we have been conscious of the need for both scholarly excellence,

diversity of approach, and breadth of representation. We are delighted to include the opening address given at the congress by Professor Michael Pye who at that time was President of the International Association for the Study of Religion. Details of the other contributors are included in an appendix. It is our hope that the Academy, as well as this its first publication, will not only contribute to the scholarly debate about religion in South Africa and elsewhere, but also contribute in some meaningful way to the debate about the reconstruction of civil society.



## CHAPTER 1

### Religion and Identity: Clues and threads

*Michael Pye*

## I

### RELIGIOUS FORCES AND ACADEMIC STRUCTURE

## INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

There are many reasons for writing this book. One of the main reasons is the relation between religious forces and academic structures. We shall then try to ask some questions about religion and identity which are of importance throughout the world, and which are at the same time of particular relevance to South Africa at this time of highly significant political change.

Religious forces and academic structures have long stood in a complex relationship with each other. Many universities began with religious foundations, not only in the western world but also in Asia. At the same time, the major questions of religion have also been pursued in universities, often in the concentration of religious leaders and above all of religious followers. There is no immediate end to this connection in time. Its complexity is reflected, understandably enough, in our other kinds of academic structure, our societies, and ourselves. It may also be seen in the increasingly vague labelling of religion such as 'religious studies'. There is therefore sometimes a danger of broadly formative religious education or indoctrination, which in turn may turn out to be a threat to intellectual academic reflection.

# CHAPTER 1

## Religion and identity: Clues and threads

*Michael Pye*

### RELIGIOUS FORCES AND ACADEMIC STRUCTURE

This paper is given on a very special occasion, namely the founding conference of the South African Academy of Religion. Since this new Academy is an institution, or an organisation, the paper will begin with some reflections on the relation between religious forces and academic structures. We shall then move on to wider questions about religion and identity which are of importance throughout the world, and which are at the same time of particular relevance to South Africa at this time of highly significant political change.<sup>1</sup>

Religious forces and academic structures have long stood in a complex relationship with each other. Many universities began with religious foundations, not only in the western world but also in Asia. At the same time, the major critiques of religion have also been purveyed in universities, often to the consternation of religious leaders and above all of religious followers. There is no immediate end to this interaction in sight. Its complexity is reflected, understandably enough, in our other kinds of academic association, our societies, and academies. It may also be seen in the generously vague labelling of subjects such as 'religious studies'. There is therefore sometimes a danger of heavily incursive religious motivation or sponsorship, which in turn may turn out to be a threat to freewheeling academic reflection.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at this situation positively, people come to religious studies from various contributory backgrounds, and it is therefore quite natural and necessary that there should be an on-going process of what I (Pye 1991) have previously called 'discipline identification'. The establishment of this new body, The South African Academy of Religion, which (as I understand) will have several differentiated constituent associations, will help greatly in clarifying the relations between the study of religion, Biblical studies, and theology, and in permitting appropriate interactions between them. Such good arrangements will assist an incoming generation of scholars to clarify their objectives and methods without strife.<sup>3</sup> It will also share in the much needed stabilisation of the relationship between the intellectual, reflective study of religion on the one hand and the hopes and fears of believing, and often disagreeing, communities on the other hand.

The influence and power of religions in the world today is really quite surprising for those who have felt, in one way or another, the force of critical philosophy or even just the vague attraction of liberal humanism. Similarly, sociologists, who have spent considerable effort in the discussion of secularisation processes, whether in the context of godless western materialism or of communist atheism, are now having to redirect their efforts.<sup>4</sup> Recently, they have concentrated more attentively on a lively resurgence of religion almost all over the globe, either in neo-traditional or complicatedly novel forms, or both. The data-handling, communications, and media revolution is also relevant. It means that some forms of religion have become much more immediately available globally and that individual choice, or individually directed manipulation, has been multiplied. The New Age is everywhere at once, and the tele-evangelism of America can be matched by the healing shows in Russia (which have however just been banned by presidential decree). The effects of such trends are important but partial. One should take care not to be carried away by buzz-words such as 'globalism' and 'post-modernism'. They are often used by those who do not write from continuous involvement in real communities, or who do not carry out long-term field work. Much of the reality of religion is not global but parochial, not effervescent but persistent, not a matter of light, individual choice but of inescapable communal realities. In many countries there is a heavy investment in religious symbol systems for the negotiation of community strife, and, alas less often, for the negotiation of peace. For this we need look no further than the United Kingdom or the Republic of South Africa. But if we do look further, we will find it again and again. The media in the UK currently have about four scenes in view where questions of religion and identity have particular prominence: Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sudan, and Palestine/Israel.

In 1994 it is still worth noting that the end of the Cold War, and the related unblocking of various other political processes, appear to have many religions in



an unexpectedly strong position. This at least is the way things are widely perceived. Yet care is needed here. Historians in future may well conclude that religion was much stronger all along than the dominating political and journalistic powers in the western world wanted us to believe. For example, the situation in Poland is subtle. It is arguable that the national identity value of Catholicism in Poland was greater before 1989 than it has been since. After the formation of the non-communist government, at least some sectors of the population began to be wary of Catholic triumphalism, and enthusiasm for religion seemed to slip just a little more than it had ever done under communist government pressure. There is no longer an Association for the Promotion of Lay Culture in Poland, and yet we may be seeing the hesitant beginnings of a new phase of secular culture in that country. The very perception, however, that religions are today enjoying a resurgence in the countries concerned, has a fly-wheel effect on their political influence, as for example in the case of Orthodoxy in Russia or Islam in the central Asian states.

This all means that the study of religion, or if the looser term be preferred, 'religious studies', is of greater relevance than ever before. It is quite essential for some of us to study religion, and today this inevitably means religions in the plural, whether we are positively disposed to the *truth* claims of any specific religion or not. It would indeed be worthwhile, as I am sure many present would agree, to study religion simply because it is interesting. Let us not fear to point out, however, that it is *necessary* to study religion because of its actual importance.

'Religion' refers here, of course, not merely to the formal theologies of particular churches, though these are indeed fascinating for the specialist. Rather, the scope of the study of religion extends to a wide range of movements and worldview orientations, to the ways in which meaning is projected through a great variety of symbolic systems, to patterns of behaviour and belief which are perhaps more disturbing, even violent, than those which are positively sanctioned in formal teaching or in gentle inter-faith dialogues. Consider the storming and destruction of the mosque at Ayodha in India. Consider insistent claims to land made today, but based on biblical stories and the allusions of long distant times, often simplistically and inaccurately presented. Such matters can only be properly perspectivised if there is a well articulated domain of academic discourse in this field. Mere journalism often fails to get it quite right. Politicians, of course, do not necessarily even *want* to get it quite right, though some do. What is 'right' is a matter of judgment and not of research. But are we not permitted to hope that study may inform good judgment and play its part in preserving humankind from further follies?



The foundation of this new South African Academy of Religion is indeed, I believe, a most auspicious occasion. It comes at a time of hope and trembling for the new South Africa, as the world awaits the first run-through of elections on the basis of universal suffrage. The creation of a new institutions within such a political context sets marks for a long time to come. May this particular institution set the right marks in its chosen field, and may the fruits of its endeavours be harvested by later generations. The structuring of academic enquiry is, as I have already said, a matter of real importance, and I would like to make three further comments on this development.

First, an academy such as this is a most important welcome organisational force in the discipline or disciplines which it incorporates. Needless to say, the ground has been prepared by the academic labours of many over the years. I am able to speak at least for one sector represented here when I say, as Secretary-General of the International Association for the History of Religions, that South African scholars and scholarship in this field have been internationally known and respected for a very long time. It is a matter of historical record that the South African Association for the Study of Religion has been affiliated to our international group for many years and remained so throughout the period of sanctions. In spite of sanctions-related decisions taken by individual scholars in other countries, worthy of respect in themselves, it seems that the decision of our association to attempt political non-alignment, and by implication to maintain contacts through the years, has been broadly vindicated. To put it in wider context: in 1992, the International Association for the History of Religions, unusually, held two regional conferences in the same year. The first was in Beijing, China. The second was in Harare, Zimbabwe, and was attended by several colleagues from South Africa. The next major congress will be in Mexico City in 1995, and I hope a good number of South African colleagues will find the time and funds to attend. I think this perspective speaks for itself. It is in such a pro-active mode that the International Association for the History of Religions has sought to be no more a political body than it is, in itself, a religious body.

Second, the coming into being of the South African Academy of Religion as an *academic* institution implies a widespread intellectual readiness to *observe* religion reflectively, and not merely to be swayed by it, or to use it. If the study of religion takes place in a context of rapid change, high aspirations, political tensions, conflict, and in some cases tragedy, then it is quite essential to be clear-headed about the objectives and possible functions of this kind of study. One fairly common solution is simply to adopt a severe historico-philological stance in the attempt to secure the integrity of academic study. However, this could amount to mere protectionism and be little more than an alibi for refusing to look at the real world. If academics think at all about their own role in culture

and in society, then surely the matter has to be more complex. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think that just anything goes in 'religious studies'. The key lies, surely, in being able to distinguish complementary levels of discourse or steps of argument. Put very briefly, we may surely differentiate between the *elucidation* of sources (oral, written or material), the phenomenological *characterisation* of a specific religious complex (a difficult task not to be despised as 'mere description'), the attempt to handle *comparison* and *morphology*, the search for *theory* and *explanation*, and the readiness to enter into debate. If these steps are adequately differentiated (even if formulated somewhat variously), then a wide range of academic discourse, though complex, can work in favour of reflective and humane understanding.

Third, the very foundation of this Academy surely implies, among other things, a profound recognition of the *plurality* of religions. Studies of religion in South Africa have, in fact, been fed over the years by a strong awareness that this plurality has a social importance. Religions arise, flourish, and decline in close association with the paths of specific communities, and even whole peoples, in their multiplicity. This is true for South Africa and, in another related and intertwined history, it is true for the United Kingdom. As many have realised in both these countries and elsewhere, it is hardly possible to understand national or community-based identities without reference to religion. On account of the extreme topicality of these matters in many parts of the world, but without presuming to make any further specific reference to South Africa, I would like to continue by presenting a few more general clues and threads which may add to the understanding of this theme of identity and religion.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

It will be well known that the theme of 'identity' has itself attracted tremendous interest, some of which was reflected in the proceedings of the fifteenth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, entitled *Identity Issues and World Religions* (Hayes 1986). Here I shall leave aside the more philosophical questions about the meaning of the term, the question of psychological identity and the role of religion in the formation of individual personality, and yet other questions about the diachronic and synchronic coherence and identity of religious systems.<sup>5</sup> The main point under consideration will be religion as a focus of social identity, where religions, however, are understood to be traditions of substantial symbolic power which have their own characteristic dynamics.



It is widely assumed that religion is important in identifying who people are. There will not be much debate about this. Similarly, it is widely assumed that language identifies who people are. Thus English people think Frenchmen are people who speak French. This is a problem, they think, which begins at Calais. For completeness' sake I will add that colour and physiognomy have often been assumed to identify who people are. People have been killed for all of these characteristics alone or in combination. In general, people are not strongly aware that these characteristics do not necessarily match up with each other. What language does a Bosnian Muslim speak? How poorly these matters are understood!

It is also commonly not understood that the functions of different religions are *more* diverse for their various adherents or believers than those of languages are (more or less) for their speakers. In this respect, religions are different from languages. People understand that languages, though mostly incomprehensible to those outside the language group, share the common function of *communication* at least within their own group. Even though the function of language and of languages is not really that simple, it may be said that the common function of communication far outweighs any secondary range of functions which might be advanced. I think we may dare say that the function of religion or religions is even more complex than that of language. Religions are not all the same kind of thing, and they have different functions. Not only are secondary typologies *possible*, and by this I mean typologies which go beyond the kind of botanical variation that is found in language, but such typological effort is necessary in order to explicate the complexities of what is going on and avoid falling into the superstitions of the man or woman in the street. Unfortunately, the complexities of religion are often misunderstood, and sometimes wilfully misunderstood and manipulated by politicians.

## PRIMAL RELIGION AND CRITICAL RELIGION

It appears to me that much of the confusion over questions of identity and religion arises because of a misunderstanding about the relationship between what may be called 'primal religion' on the one hand and 'critical religion' on the other. The history of this distinction, though not usually put in just these terms, is quite complex, but as far as I know has not been carefully traced. It would appear that a systematic morphology of religion can hardly avoid running into this problem at a very early stage, even if the proposed definitions have varied somewhat and are not all acceptable.<sup>6</sup> The terms selected here will need further explanation below, but in brief I mean (a) religions which are coterminous with a specific, natural society and (b) religions which stand in some tension to

natural society and provide a differentiated perspective upon it. Let us assume for the moment that it is indeed possible to make some such distinction between these two. The interesting thing to note is that the distinction, though initially plausible, in many cases does not seem to hold good.

This requires further explanation. In a simple typology of religion and identity there are two poles which can be discerned with relative ease, if we build on the initial distinction made above. The first is the consciously equated identity of a specific, primal religion with a natural society whose borders are believed to be known. The second is the world-related identity of soteriological or critical religions which in principle advance universal claims for the attention of humankind. For the moment, let it be added that, difficult though it is to define such fixed terms to the satisfaction of others, the real complexities arise out of the *interactions* between these two kinds of religion and even more so out of complete *crossovers*. A clear crossover occurs when a religion which has been thought by many to be the salvation of all humankind is brought into the service as the primal religion of one specified group which seeks to protect or promote itself alone.

Consider two examples of great worldwide importance. Christianity, as its representatives would often agree and indeed claim, is a soteriological, and therefore by extension, a universal religion. Yet in its specific forms, it has often been used to demonstrate the identity of apparently natural communities. Obvious examples are Catholicism in Poland during the Cold War period ('To be Polish is to be Catholic' was a current explanation), Catholicism and Protestantism in opposition in Northern Ireland, Orthodoxy and Catholicism in opposition in Serbia and Croatia (of what was Yugoslavia), and Protestantism for significant groups of whites in South Africa. Much the same may be said of Buddhism. The teaching principle of Buddhism, being about release from the ills of this life, is in principle a teaching for all human beings, or sentient beings, everywhere. For this profound reason it has been recognised in modern India as able to lift people out of the discriminatory caste system. Ironically, this same Buddhist movement in India, which began under the leadership of the Buddhist modernist Dr Ambedkar, now seems to have settled down into being a mark of community identity. It is well known that Buddhism has been important in the creation of national identity in other countries such as Sri Lanka (anti-colonialist and anti-Tamil), Thailand ('to be Thai is to be Buddhist', as the saying goes), Tibet (anti-foreign and anti-Chinese), Mongolia and Buryatia (anti-Soviet, and in Mongolia recently anti-foreign), Korea and Japan (partial responses to invasive foreign culture).



However, there is a simple reason for all this, namely that the two main types mentioned above do not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum. They interact with each other, as of course with various other social factors, and in the course of their development either type may take on significant features of the other. This leads to *crossovers* of intention and function between the two most fundamental types of religion. This in turn leads to complications, and sometimes confusion, in our picture of the relations between religion and identity.

When trying to consider such matters satisfactorily, the specialist in religion will have the usual questions about the diachronic and synchronic identity of religious traditions at the back of his or her mind. He or she will also bear in mind the phenomenological call to take the consciousness of the believer or tradition-bearer with great seriousness, whatever the apparent plausibility or implausibility of the truth-claims which may be asserted or implied. It would also appear that the matter can be further clarified if these types of religion are correlated with major types of ritual. This seems to me to be one of the more important clues in understanding what is going on and will, therefore, be explained further below.

None of these theoretical foci, however, are well understood in the media or by politicians. Sometimes, indeed, politicians understand these things only too well at a kind of instinctive level, and are able to manipulate the dynamics of religious tradition in their own interests. That is, politicians are sometimes able to use religions whose teachings apparently transcend discrimination by caste or race to set such discriminations in place and defend them. These matters certainly demand careful attention.

## PRIMAL RELIGION

First, consider briefly the term 'primal religion', with which some dissatisfaction has been expressed. This is mainly because it sounds a bit like 'primitive', which has often been used as an insulting term. Yet 'primal' is not the same word as 'primitive', and it may be hoped that we may yet be allowed to save it to be used in its own right. Another difficulty is that it has, in general, been limited to the context of small-scale and often pre-literate societies. However, this limitation is not obligatory. Indeed, I myself find the term extremely useful in the analysis of contemporary Japanese religion, in a society which is highly literate and not exactly small-scale. The main value of the word 'primal' is that it suggests some kind of fundamental priority, though this does not necessarily have to be chronological in all cases. It is therefore a valuable term as one of a pair, where the other term may stand in dialectical relationship to it.

Primal religion gives recognition to the ancestral lineage of a specific family, clan or nation, and to the myths and legends which articulate it. It secures social continuity by means of rites of transition, and it secures the economic base of society so perceived by *calendrical rites*. In emergency, *occasional rites* are also available, for example, to avert drought or epidemic, or, in Britain, to avert undue rainfall. The conceptual perspective is characterised by cosmological symbolism suggesting repetition and stability, in spite of known dangers. Divine power is understood to be focused or located in a particularistic, and therefore polytheistic, mode. Thus, meaning is geographically delimited and distant, exogenous groups are of little interest, except as a potential threat.

A clear example of a primal religion in this sense is Shinto. Admittedly, Shinto has adapted to a variety of complex developments over many centuries, and may therefore be termed 'adjusted primal religion'. Moreover, Shinto in modern times has lost its relationship to natural Japanese society as a whole. At the same time, the place of primal religion, in Japan, has been occupied by a new amalgam from various sources in which almost the whole population participates. It would be an unnecessary diversion to pursue this particular thesis at this point. Note, however, that it requires the application of the term 'primal religion' in the context of one of the world's most advanced societies. There is no question of any inappropriate correlation with 'primitive'.

The problem in social and political development is to extend the mixture and the range of any given primal religion to cater for the newly emerging parameters of the group or nation. Thus, there was discourse in ancient times about the way in which the gods of different parts of Japan were related as members of a far-flung family. In fact, such stories may still be heard today in country shrines. The diversity and the interwovenness of the myths betrays a hard-won political unity which undoubtedly was paid for with much suffering. Japanese today often make a point of their ethnic homogeneity, for which they are very thankful. The reality is that in distant times they were almost certainly ethnically diverse, or at least diffuse. Probably they were not so varied, objectively speaking, as the races of modern South Africa. Yet at the same time of political stress, the difference does not need to be great, it only needs to be *perceived* for it to be troublesome. Thinking along these lines, could South Africa find new, coherent symbols which take in more of its complex lineage in one single interwoven story? Or is this too simple? Does the modern equivalent to such processes lie, rather, in multiple access to a variety of symbols, which would have to be latently held available by a benevolently secular state?<sup>7</sup> This might even seem to verge, ambivalently, on post-modernity. But if another example of a society in rapid change be considered, namely Russia, it must be said that such ambivalence does not seem to be generally desired. Rather, there is a strong move to protect Russian Ortho-



doxy, against alternative evangelists and faith-healers, as the only strong soul of the nation.

## CRITICAL RELIGION

Turning to the second term of the proposed pair, there are several options to consider. Though 'critical' is preferred, the main line of my present argument does not depend heavily on the choice made. The same religions are commonly regarded as being 'soteriological' or 'universal' in their purport, though I see some difficulties with these terms.

It might indeed be helpful, provisionally, to suggest 'soteriological' as a synonym. The point about soteriological religion is that it implies that natural life as normally lived is not satisfactory and that, therefore, some kind of salvation or release from it is necessary. However, 'soteriological' may suggest rather too firmly the function of a saviour figure (*soter*). When it comes to meditational systems such as Jainism or Buddhism, or modern programmes of self-realisation, a saviour figure is often less important and thus the term 'soteriological' would be a little misleading - in spite of the important role which a spiritual teacher may play. What any such religions have in common is that individuals, or sometimes family groups, are separated out of natural society which is ordered by primal religion, and this implies a criticism of the latter. Thus, 'leaving the household life' is not an idle phrase in Buddhism; rather, it reflects a structuring feature based on the model of the 'great renunciation' of the Buddha himself.

As to the term 'universal religion', by which is meant a religion with a universal claim, this is open to misunderstanding for three reasons. First, the universal claim of 'religions of salvation or release' arises out of conviction that the initial, critical awareness, or even renunciation of daily life, and the consequently elaborated path of the believer or follower, are of value for other people as well as oneself. This is a very natural conclusion to draw. However, the initial movement in which critical conviction is conceived is logically prior, and in the formative period it is usually chronologically prior. It therefore seems better to emphasise it. This is clearly true for Buddhism, where the Great Renunciation of the Buddha and his 'going forth into homelessness' naturally preceded his attainment of Enlightenment, which is in turn the condition for announcing the Dhamma or teaching to his first disciples. Interestingly, there is among the narratives about the various parts of the Buddha's life a legend about who he had to be persuaded to teach at all. He was persuaded, the story goes, by the god Brahma, and then only after being asked three times and being given cogent arguments to consider. We can see from this example that the universal claim

emerges secondarily, if naturally enough, from the critical or soteriological consciousness.

Second, the question of claims to universal validity is complicated in that primal religion also, though in any one case limited to a specific natural society, can be found (more or less) in all societies. Primal religion might therefore itself be argued to be universal in a different way, that is, simply in that it occurs generally. In fact, this would seem to be the main avenue of interpretation open for those today who wish to maintain the character of a primal religion while coming to terms with the evident existence and impact of external societies. Shinto is a case in point. But this would be a different discussion altogether, and since the concept of universalism could occur in both discussions it is better to avoid it at the first level of morphological differentiation.

Third, primal religions sometimes produce their own universalising forms. Hinduism is a fine example of this. But the matter belongs under the heading of 'crossovers', for which see further below.

Let us turn briefly to the rituals characteristic of critical religions. They are rather different from those typical of primal religions. Above all, critical religions require two basic types of ritual. One is needed to incorporate the newly convinced into a community which may be both less than and more than the natural society to which they have belonged. The simplest ordination by the Buddha with the phrase 'Come, monk!' is an example of this. Christian baptism of believers is another. These rituals may be called rites of 'incorporation'. The second basic type of ritual is needed to maintain the critically separated individual in the new community. The Buddhist *uposatha* rite is a good example; the Christian Eucharist is another. These may be called 'rites of reinforcement'. These two types of ritual are typical for critical religions and pertain to their fundamental nature. They can be observed especially clearly in new religious movements with a strong soteriological consciousness which have not yet adapted heavily to the surrounding society.

## CROSSOVERS

This might all seem to be very straightforward if the picture would only remain simple in the actual history of religions. However, it does not. Primal religions colour quite deeply the critical religions which arise in their context. Critical religions, having a universal message, tend to expand their claims and pervade natural societies. Some are more 'tolerant' than others, leaving things to some extent as they are, while others take over more and more functions. In fact, even



Buddhism is not as 'tolerant' as is sometimes thought. In several cultures, it has taken over funeral rites, typical of primal religion, which in themselves have little to do with the Buddha's Dharma as such. Similarly, in South-east Asia and Sri Lanka, Buddhist ordination has taken on characteristics of an adolescent rite of transition for males. Christianity has largely allowed baptism to become a rite of transition for infants, and confirmation (separated from baptism) a rite of transition for adolescents. Birth, marriage, and death are times for going to church, it is often said, in societies where Christianity has become the primal norm and is no longer the critical difference.

Even more complicatedly, primal religions have not only been the matrix of critical religions which have distanced themselves dialectically (Buddhism from Brahmanism, Christianity from Judaism) but they have also given rise to secondary forms which seem to be a universal message, as in universalising forms of Hinduism or some of the new religions derived from Shinto shrines (Kurozumikyo, Taishakyo).

For these reasons, both main types of religion display ambivalent tendencies over identity. This leads to questions about change in specific religious traditions. But the specialist in religion will be interested in these, not merely as circumstantial historical alteration, but as questions of dynamics to be understood in terms of an overall typology.

The phenomena I have mentioned are, in general, well known, and I have purposely chosen very obvious examples. The point, however, lies in the crossover of functions. The crossover of functions becomes of particular importance when questions of identity are considered. On a simple theory, there is a distinction between the delimiting identity of primal religions, each reinforcing its own natural group, and the trans-cultural identity of communities, like the Christian Church or the Buddhist Sangha, which are conscious of being critically extracted from the natural situation. Religious people themselves, we may observe, usually have a sensitive awareness of social and conceptual continuity in religion. In complex ways, it is this which enables switches to be made between the two poles of identity. As soon as the critical religions pervade natural societies and take on the role, or some of the roles, of primal religion for the new environment, then a primal identity formation takes over and a religion with universal implications can come to be the badge of a particular people. This, in turn, may lead to conflicts which seem to stand in contradiction to the original impulses of the faith in question.

In conclusion, I would emphasise once more the extreme sensitivity of all those questions in the great variety of actual cases. It might be thought that, academi-

cally speaking, the matter could be left to rest there. The needs of society are sufficiently great and urgent, however, for theoretical impulses of this kind to be fed through into educational and media-led consciousness. If there is a wider understanding of these matters, then there may be more chances of dealing with them constructively in our modern, pluralist societies.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for the support of the South African Human Sciences Research Council for allowing the possibility to be present at the inaugural congress of the South African Academy of Religion.
- <sup>2</sup> I have dwelt on these matters in some detail in my inaugural lecture at Lancaster University entitled 'Religion: shape and shadow' (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> This point is of particular interest for the writer who is currently looking at it as Secretary-General for the International Association for the History of Religions, to which the Southern African Association for the Study of Religion has been affiliated for some time. Some readers will be aware that there has been considerable controversy in some quarters about the ways in which the 'history of religions' (a phrase with more meaning than is sometimes realised) or the 'study of religions' may be associated, if at all, with church-related, theological, or other religiously motivated studies. There are indeed real difficulties here, for which see the references in the two previous footnotes. However it is of great importance, particularly at times of political stress and creativity, that people in fact talk to each other, both in specific countries and also internationally, and contribute to the wider formation of ideas. The answer may lie in genuine mutual respect, a realistic understanding of different kinds of motivation which may be brought to bear on reflection about religion, and in a fair and open structuring of the relevant associations and institutions so that the dangers of manipulation and majorisation are avoided. The South African Academy of Religion looks set to avoid these dangers which, it must be said, have not always been avoided elsewhere.
- <sup>4</sup> David Martin, for instance, has recently authored a substantial work on the pentecostalist movement in Latin America.
- <sup>5</sup> These latter were discussed in Hubert Seiwart's paper 'What constitutes the identity of a religion?' which was set first in the proceedings mentioned above (Hayes 1986:1-7). The questions treated under this heading have also been handled as problems about the 'essence' of religious tradition (i.e. of any one such), and as problems about the morphology of religious systems encountered during fieldwork, without any necessary reference to the term identity.
- <sup>6</sup> Any attempt at a morphology of religion must, surely begin with selected major distinctions which help to bring out important characteristics. Nathan Söderblom was following exactly the same procedure in principle when he mounted a distinction between prophetic and mystical religion and sought to assign specific religions to each of these types. Ninian Smart did the same, a little more complicatedly, in his



work *Reasons and Faiths*, when he wrote of the mystical, the numinous and the incarnational 'strands'. Both had different priorities in mind and were still mainly concerned with coming to terms with the sheer existence of the religions of Asia.

7

This would be akin to what David Chidester (1991) has called for in the conclusion to his book *Shots in the streets: Violence and religion in South Africa*. For a perspicacious and detailed survey of the overall situation see the same author's (1992) *Religions of South Africa*.

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## CHAPTER 2

# **The importance of starting from both ends: An appreciative response to Michael Pye's keynote address**

*John S Cumpsty*

### INTRODUCTION

The original format of this paper was a somewhat insular plea for a greater concern with theory. Michael Pye's Keynote address called forth a change. Although Pye's area of special interest is Japan, his paper had an understood (although carefully understated) relevance to Africa that needed to be responded to. I have, therefore, taken the liberty of redirecting my paper to the most important point that Pye made in his context appropriate paper - the distinction between, and coexistence of, 'primal' and 'soteriological' religion. Both of us are deeply concerned with this issue, and he has graciously agreed that I should proceed thus.

That this discussion is relevant to religious studies is pastorally, practically, and scientifically evident. *Pastorally*, for those in Africa, the discussion concerns the consequences of retaining those elements of traditional religion which seem to participate strongly in African identity while, at the same time, embracing Christianity or Islam.

*Practically*, as always where two approaches offer related insights, the discussion concerns presentation and language. Is it better to present religious traditions as falling into two types, the one *rooting*, the other *lifting out*? This approach leans toward the possibility that one might embrace both but, inadvertently, seems to



suggest a superiority in the latter. Or, is it better to present them as falling into three viable options on the same level? This approach inevitably emphasises their logical incompatibility and the costs of mixing them).

*Scientifically*, the discussion concerns what might be gained, and what might be risked, by developing an explanatory theory 'theoretically', rather than under the close control of the empirical. It is about the possibility of starting from the other end - with what an individual might be supposed to be doing when being religious - and asking about religion's most basic entities and the processes of their interrelation; processes out of which are constructed the mosaics of almost infinite variety which constitute actual religious traditions.

If one begins empirically, then what one handles is, from the beginning, as near to real as can be determined. While not necessarily providing a better description of reality, at least one feels it is well founded. If one begins theoretically, the validity of the exercise can only emerge, way down the line, in the experience that it is enriching.

If one begins the study of religion empirically, one is restricted to *types of* distilled in the field. If one begins theoretically, one brings to the debate, not 'types of', but *ideal types* which arise only from theoretical considerations. These ideal types are logically coherent and mutually exclusive, serving to establish a clear framework in which actual traditions can be located and explained. They may not, however, be represented without remainder in any actual tradition. Such ideal types can sometimes be absent from an actual tradition, sometimes present on their own, and sometimes be mixed, but there cannot, of course, be what Pye calls 'crossovers' within them.

Along with those who work from either end researchers who deal with the impact of what they understand to be religion upon entities in their own field of interest - which can be anything from society to fine art. If their understanding of what constitutes religion is to be clarified and their findings to become integratable with those of others, then a common language is called for. Without a common language, the findings of field studies can never become shared. A common language requires the definition of terms, and of the relations between terms, which is already the beginning of theory. Theory is a discipline's universal language.

This does not, of course, diminish the importance of an empirical concern with field study. On the contrary, the validity of theory can only be tested in its power to explain, as simply and as 'fruitfully' as possible, the data generated in the field. Theory in a vacuum is no theory; but neither can the theorist reach into the



detail of every fieldworker's data. It is essential that hands-on researchers reach out to theory by distilling 'types of', so that theoretically generated 'types' might be challenged and, hopefully, be validated.

It is helpful, therefore, to find field work bridging out toward theory, as Michael Pye does. Among those who start with the complexity of actual traditions he has come nearer to where I arrive theoretically than any other researcher I know and, in the process, has seen things I failed to see.

Starting from the theoretical end generates basic conceptual entities which enable the division of Pye's 'soteriological' type into two as sharply as he distinguishes that from the primal type. They also break down further his category 'primal'. Beginning with an account of his categories, I wish to show the advantages of making those moves.

## PYE ON PRIMAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL RELIGION

Pye distinguishes two types of religious tradition; their titles reflecting meanings arising from their interaction. Each is 'a valuable term as one of a pair' (p10).<sup>1</sup>

While he prefers to call the first type 'critical', reflecting its stance over against the second, which he calls 'primal', he is happy to use the term 'soteriological' if it is not too literally applied. Earlier, he (1989:186) wrote of a 'salvation' tradition - a more general term less suggestive of a 'saviour'. In this paper he settles for soteriological.

Pye uses 'primal' in a rather special and positive sense. By 'primal', he means a tradition that is consciously equated with a natural society whose borders are believed to be known. It 'gives recognition to ancestral lineage of a specific family, clan or nation ...' (p11). 'It secures social continuity by means of rites of transition, and it secures the economic base of society so perceived by calendrical rites' (p11). 'The conceptual perspective is characterised by cosmological symbolism suggesting repetition and stability ...' (p11). 'Divine power is understood to be focused or located in a particularistic and therefore polytheistic mode' (p11).

In my terms (which do not, I believe, distort Pye's intent), 'soteriological' refers to religious traditions with a goal to be achieved; that is, where the adherent seeks to be related to a transcendent, or a not yet fully apprehended, reality. They therefore tend to the universal. Primal religion, on the other hand, keeps one rooted in this present reality. It is a *present reality affirming monism*, geographically (or presumably otherwise) limited to a community or nation.

The distinctions that Pye offers to us are *types of* religious tradition. They are the distilled experience of a hands-on specialist in the field, and they seem to me to be much better descriptive categories than any previously offered. They are more universal and they get nearer to being primary variables (variables which cannot be usefully broken down further) than any other. Nevertheless, his categories 'primal' and 'soteriological' each need a further bifurcation. Then the complexities he describes will resolve more clearly.

Before I set out to describe the further bifurcations I have in mind, I wish to continue exploring the complex relation between primal and soteriological religion. I wish to consider a number of (otherwise unrelated) situations which raise interesting questions when the categories 'primal' and 'soteriological' are brought to bear upon them. I do this because they are also situations in which the additional bifurcations that I have in mind either further focus the problem or cause it to disappear. I am, therefore, looking at some of them with a little tongue in cheek. I begin with Pye's own field of expertise, then move into areas with which I am more familiar.

## THE INTERACTION OF PRIMAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL RELIGION

It has been thought possible that the soteriological and the primal are so clearly distinct that they may be adhered to at the same time. But to what extent do people in fact hold them together? Is there a need to do so? What would be gained? What would be the costs?

At one point, Shinto (clearly in Pye's classification a primal tradition) was declared not to be a religion, but 'Japanese-ness'. All Japanese could be expected to abide by the requirements of Shinto, while not being prevented from adhering to the Buddhist, Christian, or presumably any other soteriological tradition (see Takayama 1988:328). While, for political reasons, this became a public issue in Japan, it is a *de facto*, although sometimes unconscious, state of affairs in many places. Consider a British Christian, with primal attachment to the ancient myths of King Arthur and Merlin, on the one hand, and a contemporary resentment of Arabs who buy bits of London, on the other. There are parallels to the latter aspect in the USA and Australia - most of which would never be thought of as religious, although others are associated with versions of Christianity that might be thought primal, in Pye's use of the word. Similarly, it has been possible to say 'Buddhism is atheistic but Buddhists are not'.

On the overt level, almost everybody who ministers in Africa (and many who minister in India), are faced with the question of what to do about the fact that



so many people live in, or between, two world-views represented by two overtly religious traditions. The question posed by Pye's presentation of 'complex cross-overs' - concerning the possibility of holding both types of tradition - is pastorally relevant. Would it be possible, for example, for African Traditional Religion to become soteriological, rather than Africans having to become Christians or Muslims in order to religiously enter the 'modern' world?

Members of the Church of Latter Day Saints have told me that their converts usually give up their old religion - except in Africa, where they keep the old and add the new. This may reflect a difference between converts from primal traditions and converts from other soteriological traditions, or from no tradition at all. It might also reflect the deep rooted quality of primal religion in Africa. But then there is also in India an 'Indianness' that seems to hang on in the face of developed forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. I think it more likely that the Mormons failed to perceive the things which hung on in their other converts as religion at all, never mind primal religion, while in Africa they did. No one is a *tabula rasa*.

The *prima facie* evidence being what it is, one has to ask, not only how it is possible to hold to a primal and soteriological religion at the same time, but whether one needs to. Could it be that it would be easier, unless one were marginalised and desperate, to accept the measure of world renunciation in a soteriological faith if one were already securely rooted in a barely conscious primal one?

If the need to be rooted and the need to be liberated exist together, then human beings will have devised ways, over time, of holding the primal and the soteriological together. Indeed, there seems to be evidence of this. Buddhism is particularly difficult to link conceptually with primal tradition because it holds the very opposite belief about the nature of immediate experience. But the evidence is that Buddhism both modified, and was modified, in contact with Shinto.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is because they are so different that they can be allocated to different parts of life, and not fight as other primal religions 'fight' with more overtly ethical traditions.

Anglicanism, which seems to cater for both needs, even in the same service, is a deliberate knitting together of much that is distinctly British (and apparently primal) with soteriological religion. Rejoicing in being British is linked, through Country and Queen, to Commonwealth, humanity, the whole natural order, and God.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, with it goes the demand to be universal - and so to overcome these very same boundaries.



Judaism has long held together seemingly primal and soteriological features; that is, a rooting in people and land together with a universal ethic. The conflict between these two has become more obvious since the symbolic Zion became the actual Jerusalem. In Israel, what is thought of as a tension between religion and the secular is reflected in the oft quoted statement, 'Judaism taught us not to persecute, Zionism taught us not to be persecuted, the problem is to hold them together'. But, perhaps Zionism is better thought of in terms of primal religion than secularity.

The most serious potential for division in Israel lies not between religion and a secular ideology, but in the religious tradition itself. The potential for division lies not only between the traditional symbols of people and land and the universal ethic, but also between them and traditional piety. This piety can function as a quietistic avoidance of the conflicting consequences of primal and soteriological commitments (Cumpsty 1984). These potential divisions are serious because they are deeply and ubiquitously constitutive of Jewish identity.

In the end, even the most soteriological tradition requires the survival of the community which bears the tradition. So there will always be conflict between rootedness and universalism; that is, between the survival values of individuals or small groups and the values for the survival of humanity and natural order - the latter calling for sacrifices in the area of the former.

It is in this *tradition community* sense that I read Desmond Tutu's (1977:45) plea for an understanding of 'Africanness' that can, and should, be held together with Christianity. He uses 'Africanness' in a sense that would include the geographical and national but would go beyond it to include aspects of an African Traditional world-view which would, in Pye's terms, be primal.

There is perhaps something deeper still to be said about the primal and soteriological thrusts. There is a sort of dance that humankind engages in once it has experienced a soteriological world-view. In part, this a consequence of success. When life experience is bad, there is a tendency to move away from the primal toward the soteriological; when it improves, perhaps because of the soteriological contribution, the soteriological is pressed to acknowledge some good in the primal. In this light, I have viewed the Mahayana tradition as a bridging back toward the primal from the more austere soteriological Hinayana tradition.

Then again, where the soteriological tradition in question is dualistic about reality, this seems to set up a craving for a monistic world-view. This exists alongside the felt impossibility of going back to being a happy nature religionist once one has tasted the fruits of a grand purpose.<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, an under-

standable desire to have the best of both world-views. And there are always costs to identity, and to one's logic of belonging, in doing that. But there is something more here. It seems that monism has a special appeal. When experience is acceptable but relatively static, the present-world-affirming variety of monism that we have been calling 'primal' is likely to appeal. When immediate experience is not so good, then a soteriological monism of the yet to be individually realised (or apocalyptic incursion from without) variety is more likely to appeal. Either way, monism draws people, not least because, at the cognitive level, human beings seem to have a need to think their way across the transcendence gap. However, if that appeal is responded to then, among those in whom the seed of transcendence has been sown, the dualistic tradition will eventually, and probably dramatically, reassert itself - particularly if, by the necessity of this-worldly goals such as migration (geographical or cultural) or some other shift to a stronger sense of linear time, one gets a reassertion of not-yet-ness. I perceive postmodernism as the latest swing to the epistemology of a present experience affirming monism, and wonder in what way the epistemology of the dualistic tradition will reassert itself.<sup>5</sup>

All this constitutes a very complex picture. I want to show that some of these complexities resolve if one further sub-divides Pye's category 'primal' into an ideal type of religious tradition and, what I call, 'aggregations significant in identity'; and his category 'soteriological' into monistic and dualistic 'types'. To this task I now turn.

## STARTING AT THE OTHER END - THEORY

What does it mean to start at the other end from the complex mosaic that comprises actual traditions? It is possible to be persuasive about the starting point of a theory, but the test of good theory lies in its use, not in what generates it. I will confine myself, therefore, to saying that any theory of religion must begin with religion as manifested in the individual. If religion did not do something for the individual, traditions would neither arise nor survive. I begin, therefore, with the general statement that religion is everywhere concerned with the individual's drive to be linked to whatever he or she perceives to be the really real in experience. I ask the reader's patience until the theory generated by progressively unpacking my definition demonstrates its usefulness.

My core definition is:

Religion is the quest for, realization or maintenance of, belonging to the ultimately-real, however that may be felt or conceived (see Cumpsty 1991: chapter 8).



Belonging, therefore, has two aspects: a felt sense of the ultimately-real, together with a minimal conceptualisation of the same, and a mode of belonging to that ultimately-real.

Religious experience might be infinitely varied but, because the way in which we experience is not unrelated to what we believe, it is probable that religious experience is, in part, constrained by how we conceptualise reality. Either way, there are only three ways of conceptualising the reality to which one would belong.

Humankind's primary response to the world-out-there is the uncomplicated monistic one: 'this is the real'. It will remain this way for as long as the world-out-there can be affirmed as that to which one would belong, or, so long as no other possibility is envisaged. If total experience cannot be affirmed as experience of the real, in the sense of being that to which one would belong ultimately, then the quest for belonging will lead to a splitting of experience; that is, to the conceptual separating out of that which can be wholly affirmed, from that which cannot. This 'splitting', which establishes the distinctive character of what Pye calls 'critical' (or 'soteriological') traditions, can take only two forms. It can be modelled as a divide between reality and its appearance, or as a divide within reality itself.

In the first of these forms, the reason the immediate world-out-there cannot be affirmed is understood to lie in the individual's perception. It cannot be related to as the real because it is not apprehended, either cognitively or affectively, as it is in itself. In this model, reality remains monistic, a closed system of cause and effect.

In the second form, the split lies in reality itself. There is a now, and a not-yet; a this, and a that which transcends it; a real, and an ultimately-real. This dichotomy in reality, modelled temporally and spatially, is expected to be overcome when this and the transcendent come together and reality is experienced fully.

Thus there are three, and only three, paradigms for a reality to which one would belong. The latter paradigms begin with a built in bifurcation; that is, they begin with the expectation of something to be overcome. The first paradigm begins without such an expectation and, therefore, roots one in the present experience.

These three paradigms give rise to consequential symbols. Such concern whether reality is a closed system of cause and effect, or whether there is contingency and new beginnings; whether belonging is assumed, and therefore only needs to be maintained or realised, or whether it must be sought. They also concern whether

time is linear, or cyclical and, therefore, whether the meaning of life is rooted in purpose, pattern, or just worthwhileness. Consequential symbols concern many other matters about the mode of engagement with the immediate world-out-there, social cohesion and coercion, sources of ethics, the modelling of survival after death and the nature of knowledge.

All symbols generated by a particular paradigm for reality are non-negotiable in the sense that to reject them is to reject the paradigm. The paradigms and their necessary consequential symbols give rise to flexible symbols which belong to the set, but among which alternatives are available, or upon which different emphases are possible.

These three sets of symbols - a paradigmatic symbol together with its necessary and flexible consequential symbols - constitute three coherent types of religious tradition. They are ideal, and no actual religious tradition may fit without remainder into any one of them. Logically, however, they are mutually exclusive because their modes of engagement with the immediate world-out-there (to 'fit into', to 'withdraw from', to 'take hold and shape') are incompatible. Thus, they provide a permanent frame in which ever-shifting, actual traditions can be located, and movements explained.<sup>6</sup>

For reasons set out elsewhere, I (1991:117) have labelled these ideal types 'Nature Religion', 'Withdrawal Religion', and 'Secular World Affirming Religion'. Before discussing how a primal tradition will coexist with a soteriological tradition, we need to know which of the two soteriological types is present and, therefore, which consequential symbols are potentially in conflict.

The content of 'Primal Religion', as Pye has set it out, including, as it does, a geographical or other limitation, is more complex than my 'Nature Religion'. To show where the difference lies I must introduce the concept of 'aggregations significant in identity' (see Cumpsty 1991: chapter 11).

### **Aggregations significant in identity**

In secular world affirming religion the dualism in reality sets up three actors, the self, the ultimately-real (God), and the real (the world-out-there) - all of which must be interrelated if a cosmic sense of belonging is to exist.

Traditionally, the preacher pointed to the ultimately-real; but more pastoral concerns made it clear that there can be no sense of belonging unless there is both an integrated sense of the 'This' that would belong, and an integrated sense of the 'That' to which one would belong. The broad parameters of 'This' are set by



one's understanding of 'That', but 'This' is filled out in its detail by relation to the world-out-there. It is with the details of this relation to the world-out-there, dictated by the need to belong, that I now wish to deal.

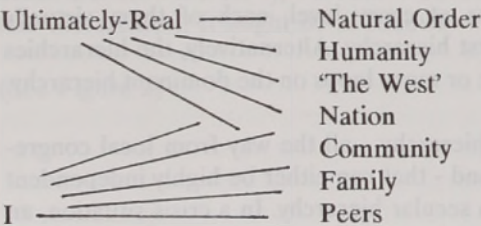
Few, if any, have a sense of belonging to anything as vague as 'a culture'. Rather, one belongs consciously, and frequently unconsciously (until something triggers awareness of it), to various groupings whose values and aspirations are taken on when one perceives oneself to belong to the group. Part of individual identity will always be idiosyncratic, much of it, however, is formed by participation in the corporate identities of these groupings.

By an 'aggregation significant in identity', I mean simply a shared-values grouping as it is perceived by the one belonging to it. It might be as structured as 'The Regimen', as relatively unstructured as 'Academia', or as totally unstructured, by anything save the values themselves, as 'Liberal'. Because each of these groupings might be thought of as a society, many religions, in Durkheim's sense of the word, might contribute to one religion, in my sense.

An aggregation is, at once, part of the individual's world-out-there, and a platform from which he or she relates to the rest of it.

A sense of cosmic belonging, a belonging to all-that-is-out-there, requires *inter alia* that the aggregations to which I perceive myself to belong are themselves capable of integration. That is, that aggregations on the same level have integratable aspirations or, if not, that justice is perceived to oversee their competition. I must also have a sense of belonging to an integrated hierarchy of aggregations on different levels. For example, I need a sense of belonging to my family or immediate group, which in turn belongs with other families to my community; and that my community, with other communities, belongs to my nation; that my nation belongs to, for example, the 'South', or the 'West', and that to humankind; that humankind belongs to the whole created order, and that to the ultimately-real. Such a hierarchy might appear as follows:

Figure 1



I stress that this is an example. There must be a hierarchy, but its constituent aggregations could be very different.

There are a number of consequences that derive from the hierarchy of significant aggregations to which an individual might belong. For one, the hierarchy of aggregations is the natural source of ethics. Each level promotes the understanding necessary for dealing appropriately, that is justly, with members of the aggregation below. Consider, for example, how one could treat with fairness a family member without an image of what the family ought to be (or how to determine obligations to one's own family, over against the needs of other families), without an image of what a community of families should be.

The desire to belong at the level above is what keeps one in relation to others on the same level while distinguishing oneself from them, even competing with them, and is thus the natural sanction for behaviour at the level in question. Should one levels be missing or weak, there would be a sense of arbitrariness to whatever ethical directives emerge in the levels below.

Contrary to much 'liberal' rhetoric, a person cannot simply belong to Humanity, or even Christianity. One needs the 'nest of boxes' sense that only an integrated hierarchy of aggregations can provide.

In the secular world affirming paradigm, it is a consequence of belief in a transcendent creator that one must recognise the desirability of understanding all aspects of experience in relation to their creator. This entails two inter-related things.

On the one side, there is a need for coherence in the understanding of the divine character as expressed in its attitudes to each of the levels of aggregation, that is, a non-schizophrenic, and therefore credible, divine personality. On the other side, there is a need that one's own understanding of the rest of experience, *sub specie aeternitatis*, also be coherent.<sup>7</sup>

There can, of course, be parallel hierarchies. A second hierarchy may be a complete one, with its own aggregations at every level, each of them virtually independent of aggregations in the first hierarchy. Alternatively, the hierarchies may interlace the second, forming one or more loops on the dominant hierarchy.

Religion itself can constitute such a hierarchy - all the way from local congregation to world-wide church and beyond - that can either be highly independent or practically indistinguishable from a secular hierarchy. In a crisis situation, an



attempt may be made to substitute the religious institution for one or more levels of the secular hierarchy, thinking of it as an alternative community.

Clearly, religion also has a role to play in the integration of other aggregations.

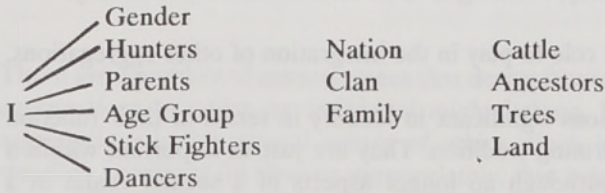
I have presented aggregations significant in identity in terms of their function within a secular world affirming tradition. They are just as important within a nature religion tradition, although no longer aspects of a secular realm in a dualistic reality but, rather, part of the monistic reality. In nature religion, each aggregation will be regarded as an aspect of the ultimately real and that, in the eyes of an observer from a secular world affirming tradition, might be seen as equivalent to having no religion at all. Alternatively, it may appear to be divinising family, community, and nation.<sup>8</sup> It is because aggregations significant in identity are an important factor in both secular world affirming religion and in nature religion, and may receive the same description while differing in reality status, that it is essential to sub-divide the category 'primal' if clarity is to emerge. In particular, it is important to understand why it is that sometimes nature religion aggregations receive descriptions that seem identical with those in secular world affirming traditions, while at other times they appear as a polytheism.

The variety in which nature religion manifests exists because it is possible to relate to significant aggregations, and to natural aspects of the world-out-there, in three perspectives each appropriate to a different circumstance. I (1991:276) have called these perspectives: Actual Life-World Perspective, Total Perspective, and the Symbolised Life-World Perspective.

In the Actual Life-World Perspective, each aspect of everyday existence is perceived as it exists in itself and in interaction with its neighbours. That is, without overt symbolic implications and without relationship to postulated entities or even to the totality of things, although a unity is assumed. This perspective exists in every culture and it suffices for a sense of belonging in an acceptable, relatively unthreatened life situation. It is the circumstance in which it might be said that the observed have no religion. Such aggregations and features of the natural order are not a hierarchy, but rather a network (although the network may contain hierarchies). It might be as follows:

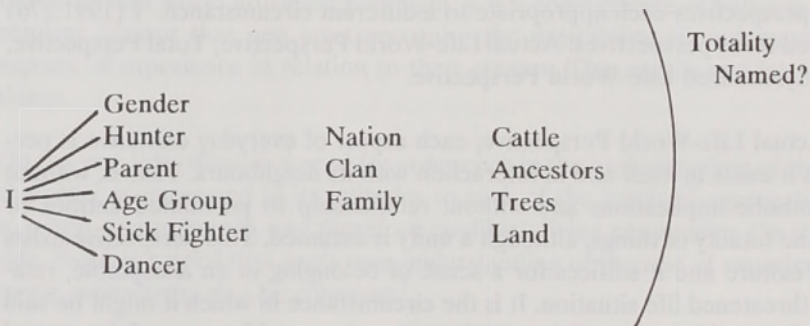
(See Figure 2)

Figure 2



If the acceptability of life experience, and therefore the sense of belonging generated by the actual life-world perspective, is threatened, then a move will be made to enter the Total Perspective. In this, one stands back from all the bits and pieces of life and seeks to know what all-that-is-out-there feels like, and perhaps asking the cognitive question, 'What is it all about?' The Totality may be given a name which, *inter alia*, justifies the view that Africans always had a *high* god, provided one does not interpret that to necessarily mean a *transcendent* god. The move to this total perspective is the only available move in an *acute* disturbance.

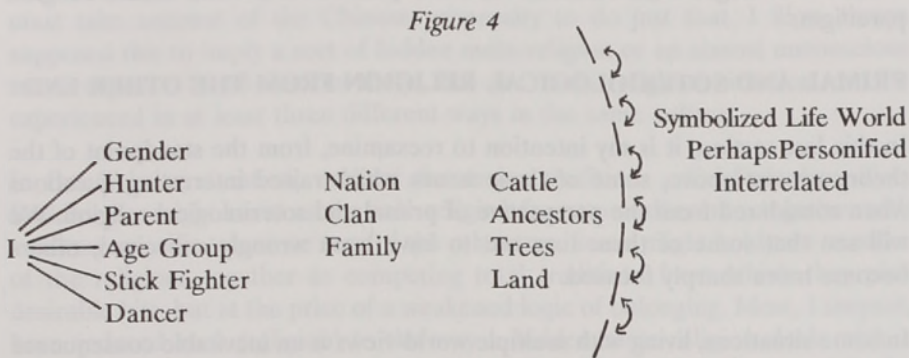
Figure 3



In a *chronic* threat to the acceptability of the life-world, there is time and motivation to enter the Symbolised Life-World Perspective in which significant aspects of the life-world are separated out and then given symbolic content and thus established in relationship with each other. This enables them to be reintegrated at a level beyond that of their actually experienced relationships. The different aspects may be personified, given the characters and whims of beasts, or conceived as vital forces that are neither personal nor impersonal. Whichever it is, the move must enable the adherents to hold their cosmos together, if only



by explaining the conflicts.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, in which each threat to acceptability must be dealt with *ad hoc*, traditions can become enormously rich in myth, ritual, and functionaries, but this is a richness born of suffering.



Each of these perspectives has a characteristic language. They sound very different, but they reflect the same purpose.

This is as far as I need to take my theoretical explication for present purposes. But not wishing to be misunderstood as overemphasising the individual aspects of religion, I must say that if I were developing the theory further, it would be with the corporate factors of the tradition community processes.

It should now be clear why I prefer to speak of monistic 'Withdrawal Religion' and dualistic 'Secular World Affirming Religion', rather than of the empirically arrived at 'Soteriological' type; and why it is the bifurcation built into these two types which lends them their soteriological quality. Less clear, perhaps, will be the relation between what Pye means by 'primal religion' and what I mean by 'nature religion', but I will return to this in the next section.

It is perhaps appropriate to say something about the choice of the terms. In my own writings, I have avoided 'primal religion' because it had been associated with theories of religious evolution in a way that made it no more than a polite form of 'primitive'.<sup>10</sup>

For those living in Africa, where this type of religious tradition is as viable an option as any other, the idea of a religious evolution on the grand scale (from type to type - not simply greater sophistication within a type), as Weber, Whitehead, Scholem, and Bellah proposed it, is out of the question. There may be elaboration within a world-view, or change from world-view to world-view,

but not an evolution from world-view to world-view (as though one were more developed than another). In fact, what some call 'primal', or even 'primitive', is the *telos* of the other types of tradition. There are many in the postmodern West who embrace a present reality affirming monism not far from the world-view of Africa. One might even discern a feminist preference for the nature religion paradigm.<sup>11</sup>

## PRIMAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL RELIGION FROM THE OTHER END

In this last section, it is my intention to reexamine, from the standpoint of the theory set out above, some of those issues which raised interesting questions when considered from the perspective of primal and soteriological religion. We will see that some of them turn out to have been wrongly conceived, others become more sharply focused.

In some situations, living with multiple world-views is an inevitable consequence of change. In others it seems to be chosen. It is this which suggests that consideration should be given to what might be gained from such a mixing. To get clarity here, we need to know which of the three theoretically arrived at ideal types are present, and what are their compatible and incompatible elements.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, we need to know how the incompatibilities that do exist might be smoothed. In general, there are three processes serving this purpose: *containment* within relevant aspects of the dominant tradition, *allocation* to different aspects of the life-world, and *bridging*. This last process can take a number of forms.<sup>13</sup>

The obvious gain in mixing the types is in being able to pick the best from multiple worlds; in particular, of having a now and a not-yet, a present rootedness and a future hope and, perhaps, an immortal soul and a resurrection. Not all of the non-negotiable symbols of the three types of religion are incompatible as between any two of them, nor are the processes (for example, the need to integrate significant aggregations) restricted to one type of tradition. Much can be held together.

There are, however, costs in picking from both worlds. These have to do, on the one hand, with the resulting lack of clarity in one's logic of belonging and a consequent loss in one's sense of belonging to the ultimately real. On the other hand, the costs have to do with the fragmenting of identity. Both the content of one's self-image and commitments toward significant aspects of the world-out-there become confused. Not only does this pose a problem for individual and communal mental health, but for such consequential matters as development.



Therefore, voluntary mixing of traditions is a possible move in times of security. It is not so possible in times of insecurity. Involuntary mixing will usually elicit some form of containment, allocation, or bridging.

Any discussion of the possibility of holding together religions of different types must take account of the Chinese propensity to do just that. I have always supposed this to imply a sort of hidden meta-religion or an almost unconscious meta-response to all-that-out-there, but the multi-religious situation can be experienced in at least three different ways in the same culture.

In the Chinese situation, each of the major traditions - Confucianism, Tao, Buddhism - might serve as the sole religion for some adherents, together with a culture-specific tolerance toward the other two. Some might hold two or more of the religions together as competing total traditions from which they pick desirable bits, but at the price of a weakened logic of belonging. Most, I suspect, have reduced each 'religion' to the way a hidden meta-religion deals with a particular aggregation or aspect of the natural world. In this last case, while the traditions may appear to the outsider as different religions *allocated* to different parts of life, to the insider they are what the meta-religion has to say about a particular aggregation.<sup>14</sup> Such a meta-religion need be no more than a cosmic trust. The cosmos, for many adherents, might be virtually synonymous with nation or people.

When this meta-religion is of the nature religion type, and the life-world aspect associated with each aggregation is therefore affirmed to be, and dealt with as, part of the ultimately-real, it is more difficult for the outsider not to perceive what is going on as being competing religions allocated to different life realms.

The meta-religion could not, I think, be of the 'withdrawal' religion type unless it was already functioning with a *Trikaya* doctrine - which itself mixes the types. If it were 'secular world affirming', it would almost certainly have to be overt.<sup>15</sup> The situation would then be at once clearer but more difficult. If what a meta-religion of the secular world affirming type has to say for a particular aggregation or sub-hierarchy of aggregations becomes a primal religion, or if an extant primal religion existed strongly enough in relation to that aggregation or group of aggregations, then there would be the overt competition that Pye speaks of between the universalising and particularising aspects of the two types of tradition. The secular world affirming meta-religion would deny the ultimate-reality status of the aggregations, seeking instead to reduce them to aspects of the secular realm.

Returning to the relation between Pye's use of 'primal' and my use of 'nature religion', it could be said that primal religion is nature religion emphasising a particular aggregation or aggregations. It might do this while remaining cosmic in spirit, or it might do it precisely because a more cosmic quality of belonging is unobtainable and there is need to resort to a reduced reality (sectarian) belonging. It seems better to conceptually separate 'type' and 'aggregations', for the latter are not always singled out for emphasis and, if they are, they can be spoken about from each of the three possible 'perspectives' in very different ways.

If primal religion roots its adherents in the present reality, then it is certainly the present reality affirming monism that I call 'nature religion', but then it will normally begin with the family and then a geographically or otherwise limited community or nation. Nation may be emphasised but it will not be exclusive. Rather, a whole hierarchy or network of aggregations and their integration are important to a sense of belonging in both 'immediate experience affirming' types of religion.

That nature religion does not have to be associated with the National level only, as Shinto seems to be with Japan (and perhaps Merlin and London real estate are with Britain), is illustrated by Tutu's use of 'Africanness'. 'Africanness' is, at the same time, much broader and much narrower than 'Nation'. It is at once a nature religion world-view at its broadest, but includes appropriate, distinctive elements at every other level - down to one's own family and peers.

Because aggregations in nature religion do not operate in a secular realm, but are part of the ultimately real, a primal religion could not become soteriological under pressure to be relevant to a 'modern' world unless it was subject to what Pye calls a 'crossover'. The sense of belonging in a present reality affirming tradition can expand beyond family and community to emphasise one's obligations to humanity, but it cannot bypass family and community in the process. If, for example, African Traditional Religion, which has been primarily a 'present reality affirming monism', takes on 'soteriological' aspects in this bypassing or saving-out-of sense, it is involved in a 'crossover'; it is moving into one of the other ideal types.

Basic to a number of these situations is the fact that, in both the primal and the dualistic soteriological types, there is need to deal with aspects of the life-world, and that while these may have the same descriptive boundaries (for example, family, community, nation), they are, in the primal type, part of the monistic ultimately-real, while in the dualistic soteriological type they are aspects of a secular realm. This may lead one to confuse the religious role of factors in the



secular life-world with their primal equivalents, and then to suppose that the primal is present with the soteriological. I believe I was doing this above when speaking of Judaism and Anglicanism within the primal - soteriological vocabulary.

The aspects of Anglicanism and Judaism addressing national belonging would, in general, be better understood as expressing the ultimate-reality's attitudes to the national level of aggregation - and that not on its own, but included with everything from family and local community to humanity. These emphases are not necessarily evidence of primal religion.<sup>16</sup>

This, however, raises a key question: When does the emphasis on nation, class, family, *et al*, in a dualistic soteriological tradition, pass over from being simply a relation of the self and of the ultimately-real to aspects of the real, and become, instead, a separate and competing primal religion?

A primal religion, if it remains nature religion, has to embrace each level, severally and collectively, up to the broadest significant one, but that might not be wider than nation. If it emphasised salvation in and of the nation only, then it would have become a soteriological tradition of a reduced reality (sectarian) kind (Cumpsty 1991:130, 329).

Even Shinto, which seems so national, must be a standing back from all-that-out-there to include it all. This is probably what it does feel like for those who do not look significantly beyond Japan. It would be interesting, however, as Pye suggests, to discover if its elite representatives did not feel that they could translate, say, African traditional religion into Shinto thought, and thus for Shinto to lose, for that elite, some of its national or geographical limitation and become the local representative of a more universal nature religion.

It is not, of course, the case that, where the secular world affirming traditions have dominated, they have always been in pure form. On the contrary, where there is a secular world affirming thread running through the tradition community's history, there tend to be swings between tradition types (which I have referred to as a 'dance'). It is important to understand this because if a secular world affirming tradition remains pure (orthodox), then it is recognised that transcendence requires the affirmation, not only of that which transcends, but also of that which is transcended (or, the work of the Creator as well as that of the Saviour). In that situation, one cannot contrast primal religion with the secular world affirming type of soteriological religion. At least one cannot contrast them, as I did, simply as 'rooting' and 'lifting out', because the latter has its own rooting mechanism. In an oversimplified way, it might be said that a

secular world affirming tradition is the adding together of a primal and a soteriological tradition. It is this that we saw in Judaism and Anglicanism. Nevertheless, the orthodox rooting is in relation to the work of the ultimately real, not in the ultimately real itself. If that distinction is lost, then primal religion is present alongside the soteriological, and consequential symbols are in potential conflict.

As a last word on aggregations in primal and secular world affirming soteriological traditions, it must be said that when both types are present, the similarity in description (but not in reality status) given to the various aspects of the life-world can, and does, function as a bridge between the two world-views.<sup>17</sup>

It has not been my purpose to deal with all the complexities in the relations of primal and soteriological traditions to which Michael Pye drew our attention - or even those that I suggested myself. Rather I have sought to emphasise, on the one hand, what might be important pastorally in an Africa struggling between two 'types' and to illustrate, on the other hand, the added analytical power achieved by moving one step beyond 'types of' to theoretical 'types'. I do think that my theoretical position offers greater analytical and explanatory power in understanding the situations which Pye introduced. But I want to reiterate that such an illustrative meeting could not have taken place unless a hands-on researcher were prepared to begin the ascent (or is it *descent*?) from data to theory. I hope that my contribution to the universal language of our discipline might be as useful to him as his contribution of both data and language has been to me. Certainly the rooting quality of primal religion had not registered with me until Pye contrasted it with the very evident soteriological quality of the tradition types which have a divide built in. Once the contrast is made, one sees it everywhere and a whole new set of questions arises. That, of course, is the advantage of researching for the greater part where real people have real feelings.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise qualified, page references are to the previous chapter.  
<sup>2</sup> Shinto adopted much from Buddhism according to Peter Takajama (1988).

<sup>3</sup> Consider in this regard the following extract from a hymn written by A C Alington for the *Shrewsbury School Hymn Book*.

**Lord God of Hosts, through whom alone**

**A Prince can rule his nation,**

**Who settest up Kings upon their throne**

**And orderest each man's station;**

**Now, and through ages following,**

**This grace to us be given:**

**To serve and love an earthly King**

**Who serves our King in Heaven.**

<sup>4</sup> Koheleth manifests this sense of loss in there being nothing new under the sun, grand as the cycles may be.

<sup>5</sup> In the postmodern West there are many movements which represent a return to affirmation of a present monistic reality, that is, to an emphasis on interpersonal relations, the natural order and the immediate texture of life. Some of these movements have an overt interest in primal religion, in others it is covert.

<sup>6</sup> I (1994) have elsewhere suggested that these paradigms for reality are so radically a part of experience, that they condition even how one sees one's own face in a mirror.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of what can happen when there are strong aggregations with a conceptual gap, or where there are weak or ill-defined levels of aggregations, or where there is the problem of the conflict between different levels of aggregation, see Cumpsty 1991:324.

<sup>8</sup> The importance of these aggregations in the identities of those sharing in a traditional African world-view can hardly be over emphasised. When migrant workers leave their rural homes for the mines and leave behind all their lower level aggregations, suddenly membership of a national aggregation, which had not figured strongly when everyone around shared it, becomes all important. This is a recipe for violence. The easiest way to confirm one's membership of that one remaining aggregation, and to demonstrate that aggregation as the best, is to take up cudgels against those of a different nationality group. The need to establish 'Africanness', or other higher level aggregations, as well as reestablish some lower level ones, becomes very pressing. Generally, there needs to be balance between aggregations, but in new nations, and

ones suffering the imposition of another culture, there may be need for emphasis on the national level to pull together smaller entities and to make sense of, and give content to, the national level of belonging.

9 Consider, for example, the category 'children born to die' in Yoruba religion's dealing with smallpox and infant mortality.

10 Perhaps for our discipline Michael Pye has rescued 'primal' by giving it a more positive connotation in the contrast with 'soteriological'. I suspect, however, that most contemporary westerners would understand 'soteriological' to refer to serious or real religion, and 'primal' to refer to something which has not reached that status. In that situation, one might feel enabled to hang onto both traditions simply because they do not have the same status - a variety of 'great tradition, little tradition'. I once suggested using 'primary' religion (for such it is), but in the end preferred the title 'nature religion' because it reflects the fact that it is a world-view in which reality begins with the natural order.

11 In the academic discussion of religion, Africa was included among religions labelled 'primitive' and then 'primal'. It was the limited understanding of primal religion which enabled people to conceptualise world religion in evolutionary perspective.

12 The elements of the three ideal types are discussed in Cumpsty 1991 ch 8, a table of non-negotiable elements is to be found on page 218.

13 For ways in which a community may seek to hold together elements of two world-views see 'Complex Tradition Communities' in Cumpsty 1991:417.

14 This position is the 'Symbolised Life-World Perspective', described above, where the unity of the cosmos is not constantly threatened.

15 A covert felt sense of reality is inevitably a cosmic trust and that, inevitably monistic in one form or the other. If there were no trust, or reality was felt to be dualistic, that would surely drive the adherent to some conceptualisation and hence out of the covert position.

16 It is interesting that the entity 'local community' is less frequently included in religious consciousness unless it is also a minority group, ethnic, or religious.

17 It is my view that these are the most important bridges between the two immediate experience affirming world-views - not least in the case of gender preferences for the different world-views, where men and women meet in shared perception of the descriptive boundaries of an aggregation while assigning it different reality status.



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